The Need for a Revolutionary Anarchist Federation

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Since the 1980's, the Anarchist movement has experienced a steady increase in numbers and activism. Much of this growth has been spontaneous and inspiring. With that growth we have seen strides in virtually all strains of Anarchism, but the one that has perhaps had the greatest impact on modern Anarchism in the last thirty years - the revolutionary anarchist tendency - has grown stagnant, and its time to resurrect this vibrant wing of Anarchist organising.

In truth, revolutionary Anarchism has not entirely disappeared, but its most pronounced manifestations in the last thirty years can be traced to Lorenzo Kom'boa Ervin (Black revolutionary and author of Anarchism and the Black Revolution), and to the now defunct Love & Rage Federation, while for all its faults, L&R represented a leap for North American Anarchist politics.

Whereas Anarchists had often participated invisibly in the revolutionary movement, L&R was an attempt to present Anarchism as a distinct pole within the broader revolutionary struggle, with its own visions and politics. Some sectors of the Anarchist movement criticised this tendency, along with various missteps and inability to answer criticism of vanguardism and poor organisational practice as "authoritarian" and sought another method of organising. The Network of Anarchist Collectives (NAC), a free association-oriented network, was formed in the mid-90's, in part, as an alternative to L&R. L&R's final undoing, however, was a host of political differences within the organisation that prompted its dissolution on May 23rd 1998. By most accounts, NAC has vanished as a functioning body as well.

L&R's break-up is said to of followed a 2 year long debate within the organisation around key questions - among which was a conflict between members who felt most social questions could be solved within an Anarchist framework and those who felt Anarchism didn't offer all the answers. Inevitably, the latter was accused of attempting to co-opt Anarchism with Marxism, while the former was pegged as moralistic and vague. What factors led not only to L&R's failure, but also to some of its organisers to abandon revolutionary Anarchism and adopt authoritarian ideologies?

L&R has been dogged for years by accusations of shady politics, in part fuelled by the involvement of ex-members of the Trotsky-leaning Revolutionary Socialist League, and also through the federations willingness to exert its will even at the risk of alienating potential supporters. At its 1993 conference where L&R emerged as a federation, many accused federation advocates forcing

a move from its then-network-based structure at a moment when opponents of the move hadn't expected it; one article later referred to that event as "conference of the long knives." A failure to decisively put accusations of vanguardist tendencies to rest reportedly hung over the group until its final days and are arguably at the core of its demise.

A united Anarchist group is needed, and we need to move beyond abstractions about organisation and start dealing with the realities we profess to understand. It's as if we speak out of ignorance. We don't want structure, stated goals, or to explain our ideals, yet wonder why people think Anarchists are incoherent or why we're isolated and with few allies. When people talk about organising, we conjure imagery of constitutions, regulations and authority to criticise those propositions, yet we're at a loss when movements within which we stand on the margins develop out of organising and see victories. We talk of the irrelevance of "theory" and how we are all about "direct action" but do lots of talking while others do the acting, often after reaching unity with others through "theory". We say we don't need a "program" to develop trust with comrades, but are confused when we don't find agreement with those same comrades because we arrogantly assume they think like us. We talk about revolution, but try to turn the fight against white supremacy into a piece of a laundry list for the "revolution" to deal with. We talk about freedom, when our presumptuous ideas about freedom condemn us to intellectual chains.

Some are opposed to the idea of a federation, arguing it is authoritarian. Often, such activists end up creating "alternatives" to the "authoritarians" and end up doing nothing or simply perpetuate the frustrations and isolation Anarchists end up courting. Is organisation anti-Anarchist? In 1912 in Lawrence, Massachusetts, USA, the anarcho-syndicalist Industrial Workers of the World was at the centre of organising when weavers, angered over the reduction of their $8.76/week wages, stopped their looms and walked out of the mill. As mill after mill went on strike, a committee of 50 was set up, representing every nationality among the workers, to make decisions. The IWW organised mass-meetings, parades and soup kitchens. They accomplished this by organising themselves. During the Spanish revolution, workers and peasants seized and collectivised factories and land, instituting their own workers committees and peasant assemblies. Spanish revolutionaries created their own institutions, formed armed workers squads to patrol the streets, and established a revolutionary force, which went on to battle the fascist Franco's squads. Men and women of these forces elected military commanders, yet rank conferred no real distinction. They historically put the idea of organisation to good practice. Why can't Anarchists grasp the need for organisation today? Some segments of the Anarchist community advocate reliance on a network structure that looks to autonomous collectives for direction. One of the network-collective model's failures is its dependence on regional collectives to reinvent the wheel, so to speak, in terms of creating principles for democratic organising and structure, when some new organisers (with no disrespect intended) have no clear concepts or assistance in this area. Furthermore, networks often operate at a disadvantage by having no means by which to carry out the decisions they make, because they lack internal structure and accountability to see the ideas carried out. More troubling is the widespread belief in a separatist organising model dictating that collectives should have no contact, work in relative isolation and only be in touch when necessary. This is better known as a strategy of "leaderless resistance," popularised by former Klansman Louis Bean, and is aimed at keeping supporters autonomous to engage in their own "lone wolf" actions that ideally protect them from the rest, repression and litigation. Obviously, this model has proven a failure in all 3 respects. Whether we like it or not, repression, jail and death are realities any revolutionary has to consider.

This isn't a cry for martyrs, but a wake up call to those who pretend isolation is a defence and small group action is a substitute for organisation.

Clearly, a formal organisation isn't the only way for ideas to come to fruition, but developing our own internal structure is probably much more positive and successful than the "on paper only" unity some network formations represent. Federations set clear expectations of its members and establish bodies (committees, working groups) to get work done, and develop democratic structures to actually carry out our decisions. Should this entail a massive bureaucracy? Not at all, and the notion that being organised requires an immense bureaucracy is a misconception that needs to be confronted immediately. Love & Rage, for example, developed working groups to focus on various issues and struggles. All "organisation" means is that we need to agree together to some issues, be willing to share these goals and the labour involved, and decide our unity is important to our collective empowerment.

For years, achieving unity has been difficult. One method some organisations have utilised is the development of a basic 5 - 12 Point Principles of Unity, framing core beliefs, goals and/or strategies but not committing every cell to a given "platform". Setting out clear principles of unity gives local groups a basis for our collective work, but doesn't tie every cadre down to politics that don't apply to its local character, culture or experiences. A new federation could bring together groups to build an organisation around this basic political/strategic unity.

What voids can a federation fill? The possibilities are too numerous to list! A national campaign against Kom'boa's frame-up by the racist "justice" system in Chattanooga, Tennessee needs to happen now. A Love & Rage style newspaper or mass publication presenting Anarchist news and theory is a great idea. Other priorities include building principled unity between communities in struggle, revolutionary prisoners and labour; developing Anarchist organising and networking with existing groups, to be a strong voice in struggles; helping new collectives grow and helping them flourish and support regional groups; cultivating independent media, from supporting existing outlets to creating our own - from the aforementioned paper to putting Anarchist readings and ideas to cassette, CD and MP3; serving as a forum for sharing street action experiences in an age when repression is getting fiercer, and tactics for dealing with it; and the list goes on.

Our movement is at a critical time in history, a time when we've seen strides and losses, but which presents the kinds of opportunities to take Anarchism to a level it needs to go. What are we doing to see that it happens? And can we afford NOT to make those strides? Its time to build!

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